

MENNONITE HISTORICAL BULLETIN

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Preacher on Foot—Christian Reeser

ETHEL REESER COSCO

In 1867, ten years after he came to Illinois, Christian Reeser was ordained to be a preacher. With a farm in need of improvement and a growing family to provide for, it was a serious matter to accept such a responsibility, especially in a day when most of the ministers received no salary. However, he took that call of the church so seriously that from the beginning he made it the chief business of his life.

Although his active years of ministry carried him to points outside the local area, his main place of service was in the Roanoke congregation. This was one of two congregations which had grown out of what was originally called the "Mackinaw Meeting," a group of Amish who had settled along the Mackinaw River. At first the few families met for worship in each other's homes in the same manner as the Amish do today. That practice became inconvenient with the continual influx of new settlers and the increase in the size of families already there. In 1872 those who lived toward the south purchased a building formerly used by the Rock Creek congregation; in 1875 a new building was erected by those who lived farther north. This became known as the Roanoke church.

That is the reason why Christian Reeser was ordained in a private house and why his first seven or eight years of preaching was done in homes. His ordination was decided upon by a vote of the congregation and took place at the same time as that of a co-minister, Joseph Wagner. Jacob Zehr, the co-operating bishop of the two congregations, officiated at this service. Harry Weber, in his history concerning the Mennonites of Illinois, says the ordination occurred at the Christian Schrock place, a short distance east of where the church now stands. However, the living members of the family say that the service took place in the Christian Zehr residence, a brick dwelling house on the Mackinaw River, where he also preached his first sermon.

There were a number of reasons why the members of the "Mackinaw Meeting" felt led to cast their vote for him as a minister. Most important, his life showed the fruits of a genuine spiritual conversion. No one seems to remember hearing



Christian Reeser, 1819-1923. Ordained a minister in the Amish Mennonite Church in 1867, he gave his last address in his church in his 100th year. For many years he served the Roanoke, Illinois, Mennonite Church.

him say at what age or place he experienced a personal salvation, but he used to speak of the joy he felt, realizing victory over habits which before he had been unable to conquer by his own will power.

His keen interest and delight in conversing with people fitted him for his mission, as well as his unassuming and humble manner. He also possessed a selfless quality of expecting more of himself than he did of others, which endeared him to people. Perpetual optimism, a keen sense of humor, and a sympathizing nature were among his personal attributes which promised to qualify him for pastoral work.

His interest in politics was unusual for a Mennonite minister of his time. He shared the generally accepted principle of the separation of church and state, but unlike some of his contemporaries who closed their ears to news of world governments, he kept up a keen interest in international affairs. He subscribed to the *Weltbote* (World-News), a weekly newspaper published in the German language in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Once a week he walked through the fields or rode to Slabtown to look for its arrival. When he reached the store, his first question was, "Ist die Zeitung hier?" ("Is the paper here?") If the answer was "Nein," he was disappointed. In the evenings, John read the news to him and the two discussed world events and problems. The younger children who listened learned something of the unusual knowledge of geography and history he possessed for one who had not gained it through formal schooling.

His firsthand observation of the undesirable effects of war upon nations made him alert to any news that foreboded strife, especially in those nations surrounding his native land, France. He also closely followed the progress of the new nation where he now lived.

One day after crossing a river near Bowling Green, he met a tall, lanky man whose feet were hanging low on his horse. Like all strangers who met in those days, the two passers-by exchanged a few words. Christian would have liked to converse at length, but the man remarked that it was necessary for him to reach Metamora by a certain time. Each man started on his way, then both travelers, turning their horses simultaneously, asked what both had forgotten—the other's name. Christian gave his. "And yours?" he called. "Abraham Lincoln," was the reply.

That name was to mean more to him as time went on. But from that simple meeting Christian developed a keen interest in the man who later became a president of the United States. He went to Metamora several times to listen to Lincoln's speeches and debates, and was impressed with the simplicity and seriousness of his words. He closely followed Lincoln's political career and, being convinced that he could keep the nation from the threatening war, voted for him in the presidential election. When later asked

why he, a Democrat, had voted for Lincoln, he replied, "I liked his platform, and if that is good, it doesn't make me any difference to which party he belongs."

With all his interest in politics, however, he realized the limitations of human governments and leaders, and maintained the conviction that Christians, as the salt of the earth, could serve God and their country best by living a peaceable and godly life. This belief, formed early in life, became the basis of many of his sermons after he was called to preach.

His first sermon was preached soon after his ordination. That occasion seems to have been more trying for his wife than it was for him. He was then forty-eight years old and his lack of a formal education and inexperience in public speaking caused her to doubt his ability. When the moment came for him to stand before the group and preach the Word of God for the first time, the poor woman felt her courage give way. She took advantage of the fact that Baby Sam began to whimper and left her place to walk out into the yard. There she reflected upon the faith and courage of her husband, and after praying for strength to share the responsibilities of the days ahead, she went in again. Perhaps a reassuring smile was now on her face.

Those who have heard Christian Reeser preach have remembered the warmth of his usual opening words, "Meine geliebten Freunde!" (My beloved friends). Bishop C. F. Derstine says of his sermons: "His style was exhortational. Usually he quoted the Bible considerably, which was quite helpful, indeed. His wholehearted and sincere handling of the Word made him quite effective. He had a vigorous style of presentation. He was whole-souled."

Oftentimes during a service, he led forth in one of his favorite songs. Among those were: "There Is a Fountain," "Brightly Beams Our Father's Mercy," and "On Jordan's Stormy Banks." When he preached at funerals he usually sang "The Haven of Rest." On one occasion he took Lena and Ben, aged about twelve and ten, to the funeral of a child and asked them to sing, "Nearer, My God, to Thee."

It would be interesting to know the number of times he was called upon to preach at a funeral, but the idea of keeping such a record was not in accord with his conception of service. By far the largest number of his walks across the fields were for the purpose of comforting a bereaved family and preaching at a service for their dead.

Several people who remember his preaching have described it in these words, "He preached straight from the heart." His deep voice carried well and he preached in an overflowing manner and without hesitation. It became apparent that the Spirit of God gave him

the words to speak as he stood before the people.

However, it is not to be supposed that he preached without forethought or study. Although he did not rely on written notes for reminders while he was in the pulpit, he spent many hours each week either reading the Scriptures himself, or having them read until many verses became engraved in his memory. He was of the firm conviction that Biblical truths could be translated into practical daily use. He also felt the need for improving his method of relating those principles so that they would be understood clearly. That is why he could often be heard by his family, practicing aloud as he pulled weeds in the cornfield or did some other work out in the open fields.

There are people who, knowing that his wife did a considerable amount of reading to him, have come to the conclusion that he was unable to read for himself. This was true in the beginning, but after the ordination, Barbara taught him to read. The practice called for considerable effort from him because he started when he was no longer young, and it was always easier for him to concentrate on the message of the words when someone else did the reading. Before starting out for church, he usually requested a rereading of the chapter he had chosen so that it would be fresh in his mind.

The following words from Debolt Householder give an insight, not only into his preaching, but also into other work connected with the life of a minister in those days.

"What he preached, it was from the Bible. His policy in preaching was 'Preach what the people can understand and loud enough so they can hear you.' He didn't have much education, but he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He often walked eight miles on Saturday evenings and stayed overnight with someone who lived near the church so he would be there on time Sunday morning. He often preached in the homes too. He had a lot of 'git' about him and he never quarreled with people. When he went anywhere, he paid out of his own pocket. He helped my brother, Fred, get a wife."

This last-mentioned courtesy was a common part of a preacher's ministry. The custom of that day called for little courting, and once a man had fully made up his mind about whom he wanted to marry, his next step was to make the decision known to one of the ministers. Preacher Reeser was frequently asked to use his power of persuasion in such a cause. Early one day while butchering, he was interrupted by a youth who pressed him to go and ask for the hand of a girl who lived some distance away. Christian felt he could not be spared from the work that day but he finally gave his reluctant consent after the young man had begged to take the minister's place in the day's work. Christian wasted no time travel-

ing to the girl's house, hoping to get her answer and to be home again by evening.

The girl was an interested listener but in spite of Christian's warm and convincing words, she made it very clear that she could not give an answer to a matter of so great importance on such short notice. She stated that she would like to have one day's time to decide. So the minister found himself sympathizing with the girl who had to make a decision of such importance. He made up his mind to forget the butchering and stayed there for the night.

He was surprised the next morning to hear her give her consent without any apparent indecision. He hurried home to give the glad news to the man who had all but given up hope the night before, when Christian did not return. He arrived in time to help finish the butchering job. The accommodating minister later learned that the girl had told her friends she knew all the time she would say "yes" but felt that "a man should be kept waiting at least one day!"

There were some difficult and strained periods in the long years of Christian Reeser's ministry. This can be understood when it is remembered that those were years of rapid growth and change in the whole nation, and consequently, in the church in which he served. He was considered by some of his contemporaries to be liberal on many points, yet like many of the older ministers he perceived harm in some of the new ways of living brought about by commercial and industrial changes. Likewise he grew suspicious of innovations in the church, which, up to that time, had followed a relatively unchanging pattern of life and worship.

The records of the Roanoke congregation show that an unsuccessful attempt was made to start a Sunday school about the year 1882. A second attempt, made in 1883, also met with failure because some of the older ministers and members thought the younger generation was introducing something new which would prove harmful. To draw a fair picture of his life and ministry, it must be said of Preacher Reeser that he was one of those who discouraged these attempts in the beginning. He did not readily submit to the idea of missionary societies, revival meetings and young people's Bible meetings, when they were first introduced in the churches.

After he had passed middle age, he started to chew tobacco and never agreed with the ministers who tried to point out that such a habit was morally wrong and a bad example to the younger people. He began to use tobacco, he said, because Dr. Crawford told him it would cure the trouble he started to have with his eyes. In defense of having acquired the habit, he pointed out the fact that he was able once again to read his Bible without difficulty.

With these few exceptions, Christian agreed with his co-workers. When he disagreed, he did so in a humble manner and never pressed his own personal opinions to a point where disharmony was created or fellowship broken. He was known for upholding the voice of the conference in warning against the sin of "kleider-pracht" (fancy clothes).

His local conference also decided that the Annonites, as nonresistant people, should not deliver up a thief to civil authorities for punishment. Christian had an opportunity to put this decision into practice very shortly. A certain young man who felt the urge to get some easy cash and who knew where the money was kept in the Reeser household set some brush afire at a safe distance from the house. When he thought that all the family had left to fight the fire, he started to climb into the house through a back window, but was caught by one of the boys who let the window down, keeping him there in a half-in, half-out position. In spite of his cries and pleas he was held fast until the fire was extinguished and the preacher appeared on the scene. He was set free only after he listened to a sermon in which he was duly warned against the sins of deceiving and stealing.

Another incident that involved a neighbor shows that in his daily life Christian practiced what he preached in church. This man, whose first name was Adam, had a reputation of being proud, and he often would scoff at Mr. Reeser for his godly life and kindly warnings about the end to which his sins would bring him. He bitterly resented the minister's rebukes when he gave his frail, meek wife a black eye for no apparent cause.

Adam knew the position his neighbor took regarding the taking of life in warfare and he used every opportunity he could to deride him for that belief. He took an obvious delight in wearing his Civil War coat whenever he appeared before Mr. Reeser. With its large brass buttons, the heavy, woolen, capelike garment made a fine showing.

One day in April, Adam crossed the Mackinaw River and went to Secor to buy a corn planter. It rained hard while he was gone and he was compelled to stay overnight with friends until the river was again low enough to cross with a team and wagon. When he approached the swollen stream the next day, he was apprehensive about the safety of crossing and he forgot to hook the extra fastenings on the hollow-box wagon top to the wheelgear. He guided his horses through the shallow water near the bank, but when he came to the swift part of the current, he felt the reins suddenly shorten. Immediately he knew what was happening but it was too late to do anything. The horses crossed over, taking the front wheels with them while Adam found himself floating downstream sitting precariously atop the wagon box. The helpless man

realized his peril and he began to curse and swear in a manner in which, after long years of experience, he was very proficient.

The preacher and his sons, who were working in the field bordering the river, heard the man's oaths and they saw his wagon box pitch in the swirling water, tossing Adam about like a leaf. The drowning man would lunge after the wagon and lose it again after a moment's hold. In desperation, the man tried to free himself of his heavy, water-soaked, military cape, for it was a millstone about his neck and hindered him in his efforts to save himself. Failure to free himself of it brought forth fresh volleys of cursing.

The boys secretly enjoyed the spectacle, thinking the cold bath was a just punishment for a haughty man like Adam. However, they followed their father's order to pull down a vine of the thick, climbing grape that wound around the trunks of the trees along the bank. They heard him instructing Adam to try to keep his hold on the wagon box and guide it near the shore where they were when it neared the approaching bend in the river. They heard him add, "Stop swearing and pray; it'll do you more good!" Adam feebly tried the suggestion and saw his answer in the form of a strong, ropelike vine being thrown out to him. Once he was safely on shore, the frightened, dripping man slinked homeward without saying a word, his wet cape hugging his body close.

The next day Joe retrieved the back wheels of Adam's wagon and pushed them up to the barnyard. While everyone was inspecting them and speculating upon the possible effect the accident might have on Adam, that man walked shamefacedly into the yard. Silently, he held out a roll of several bills toward his benefactor, but the good man refused them and added, "I don't want your money. I'm happy enough to see that God spared your life!" This irked the man and he cried out, "If you don't take it, I'll throw it on the ground!" He finally succeeded in giving it to the boys who probably felt they were entitled to a little remuneration for their part in the rescue.

Adam's conversion has never been reported, but it is said that in the days that followed, he treated his neighbor, the preacher, with greater respect.

Christian Reeser's reluctance toward accepting money for his services was not always fully appreciated by his sacrificing wife. She sometimes remonstrated with him for putting a generous amount of money in his hat before he began passing it for the offering at church. She reminded him of their poverty at certain times of the year and of the fact that he was paid nothing for all his walking and swimming across the icy river to help people who possessed much more than they, as far as worldly goods were concerned. But his only answer was, "Do you

think I can start the hat around with nothing in it and expect the people to give freely?"

Her attitude can be understood more easily when one considers the difficulties under which she raised her twelve children. It had been especially trying for one who was not trained in girlhood for the sacrifices she was constantly called on to make. Some of her children have recalled a period of extreme discouragement one evening when they were out gathering cabbage to make kraut on the morrow. Their father was gone on one of his frequent trips, at which times her responsibilities were doubly heavy. She stood gazing at the moon, lost in deep thought. Then she mused, half-aloud "O moon, you're shining now on my home in Germany. If I could only be there now! I'd walk all the way back if I could."

Then while she was on the subject of the past, she spoke for the first and only time of the man in Philadelphia to whom she had first been engaged. She had heard he had become wealthy in the business in which he was still struggling when she broke her relationship with him. Aloud, she wondered if life would have been easier if she had married him instead of the minister who always sacrificed.

Although Minister Reeser felt his wife sometimes worried too much about the temporal side of life, yet he realized that without her brave sacrifices, he would never have been able to carry on the spiritual ministry that he did. For her sake, he was glad when they were able to retire on a small place near Eureka, where she could live a less burdensome life. After she was gone he keenly missed the grey-haired companion who had sat by his side so many times, reading the Bible to him. Even though he continued to preach after she died, it can be said that his active period of ministry came to a close around the time of her passing.

(The above chapter is taken from *Christian Reeser—The Story of a Centenarian*, by Ethel Reeser Cosco, Route 1, Tangent, Oregon, from whom this new book of 101 pages may be ordered for \$3.00.)

NEW BOOKS

J. Winfield Fretz's *Pilgrims in Paraguay* was published recently by the Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pa.

G. F. Hershberger's *War, Peace and Nonresistance* has been revised and reprinted by the Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pa.

Delbert Gratz's *Bernese Anabaptists* was published by the Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen, Indiana, in 1953.

Annamarie Krause's doctoral dissertation entitled *Mennonite Settlement in the Paraguayan Chaco* was published by the Department of Geography, University of Chicago, in December 1952.

A Brief History of the Mennonite Congregation at Concord, Tennessee

MRS. T. K. HERSHEY

I remember my great-grandfather John Stoltzfus as a man of medium height, kindly blue eyes looking out from beneath shaggy white eyebrows. I was 10 years old when he passed away. He preached in German, dressed Amish, and was a broad-minded man.

One incident that I remember was that when two of his grandchildren (one an aunt of mine) requested to be baptized by immersion, he took them to a neighboring creek and immersed them, this in spite of having been brought up and having served in the Old Order Amish Church.

My great-grandfather was a deacon in the Amish Church near Gap, Pa., which met in private homes for worship. He saw the inconvenience of large gatherings in private houses. It may have been a western idea to build meetinghouses, but the idea found his favor. He donated the ground for the erection of the Millwood Church near Gap, Pa., and for a cemetery. It is said that one of his little daughters was laid away in the first grave of this cemetery.

Great-grandfather John Stoltzfus found his bride, Catherine Hooley, in the Kishacoquillas Valley, Mifflin County, Pa. This was a distance of more than 100 miles from Gap, Lancaster County, Pa. When Catherine had her belongings packed to move to Lancaster County, they were loaded on a boat and shipped down the Susquehanna. John and his bride started off on horseback. They had gone only a short distance, when Catherine remembered that she had forgotten the key to the trunk of her dowry. John did not care to have her return for the key for fear she might change her mind about going to Lancaster County. He himself returned for it. Great-grandmother was a brave woman; no one ever knew her to be homesick or discouraged through all her trials.

They had a family of 15 children. There were two pairs of twins. (Silvanus Yoder of Goshen, Ind., is the son of one of the twins. Leah was her name.) When their children were all married except the youngest two, John B. and Jacob M., the father heard propaganda concerning rehabilitation in the South due to the Civil War having devastated much of the country and homes. Thinking there might be an opportunity for buying cheaper land than could be bought in Lancaster County, in March 1872, John Stoltzfus at the age of 67 set out to organize a colony of Amish settlers near Concord, Tenn., 15 miles west of the city of Knoxville. As a colony, they were granted free transportation of their household goods. A Southern plantation was purchased. Two

of his married daughters—Mrs. C. B. Neuhauser (mother of Mrs. I. W. Royer), and my grandmother, Mrs. John S. Stoltzfus (Stoltzfus married to Stoltzfus), and three of his four sons made their home in Tennessee.

Here Great-grandfather again donated land for a church and a cemetery, where he and his wife, the two daughters, Mrs. Neuhauser and Mrs. Stoltzfus and husbands, and a number of grandchildren are buried.

John Stoltzfus, Sr., was the minister who shepherded the little flock. Other Amish Mennonite families moved in but there was a restlessness, perhaps for economic reasons. Tennessee had been the battleground of the Civil War, which was felt for many years. He used to say that if the Amish did not care to come, he wished the Mennonites would come. One Mennonite family moved in before he passed away in 1887 at the age of 82. His son John B. had been ordained to take the father's place but for some reasons he did not continue. Just about this time his three sons, Christian H., John B. and Jacob M., joined the Plymouth Brethren in the city of Knoxville.

For about a year after the death of Great-grandfather, the little Amish Mennonite colony had no leader. They attended the Methodist Sunday school and services about one and a half miles away. I well remember how we enjoyed the fellowship in Sunday school rallies and picnics.

In 1888 Henry H. Good (father of Mary M. Good, missionary to India), an ordained minister at Elida, Ohio, moved with his family to take charge of the Concord Church. It was to be an amalgamation of Amish and Mennonites and was known thereafter as a Mennonite Church. Some who were Amish always stayed Amish in their ideas. One "bone of contention" was that of joining a conference. The Amish are congregational in government. If the congregation belongs to a conference, then conference rules.

Bro. Good was not a bishop; for this reason, a bishop was called usually from Ohio or Virginia, to administer the duties of bishop. When a bishop was called, invariably the question of joining a conference was discussed and voted on, the Amish element and others voting against it. At long last, perhaps 14 or 15 years, Bro. Good gave up and resolved to move to another locality. This may have been about the year 1903 that he and a part of his family moved to South Boston, Va. Here he lived only a few years and is buried there near South Boston, Va. He

was yet a comparatively young man, just about fifty years of age.

During the 15 years, more or less, that Bro. Good had charge of the church at Concord, a number of Mennonite families moved in until there was a flourishing congregation of 100 to 150. A larger church building was erected and activities increased. Another man, Noah Z. Yoder of Amish background, was ordained minister. Henry J. Powell, Mennonite, of Elida, Ohio (formerly), was ordained deacon. These men were well received and the arrangement was congenial with the congregation. The next step would have been to ordain a bishop, but that was not realized.

There was really never the harmony and unity in the brotherhood that there should have been. Ultraconservatism did not take with those who had not been brought up that way and who had no conviction for it.

So for various reasons, one by one the families moved to other localities until there are only three of the original families left. There is only one at Concord; the other two are in Knoxville. Bro. Yoder, the minister, moved with his family to Fairview, Mich., where he passed away some years later. Bro. Powell, the deacon, was given the privilege often to take charge of services. Later, Wm. Jennings was ordained as minister and now is bishop also. Mrs. Jennings is a daughter of Henry H. Good. The congregation has been affiliated with the Virginia Conference.

The Virginia Conference now considers the Concord congregation as a mission outpost. Bro. Lawrence Brunk had finished a 2-year term there just prior to the launching of the Brunk Bros. Tent Revivals.

Elverson, Pa.

RESEARCH NEWS

Dr. Cornelius Krahn was awarded a Fulbright scholarship for research at the University of Amsterdam during the 1953-54 school year. His topic is "The Contributions of the Dutch Mennonites in the Realm of Religious Thought and Social Institutions."

Robert Kreider received his Ph.D. in history from the University of Chicago in June 1953. His thesis topic concerned the relation of the Swiss Anabaptists to the state. Dr. Kreider is serving as Dean of Bluffton College.

Paul Peachey received his doctor's degree from the University of Zurich in August 1953. His dissertation dealt with the social status of the early Swiss Anabaptists. Dr. Peachey is now on the faculty of Eastern Mennonite College, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

